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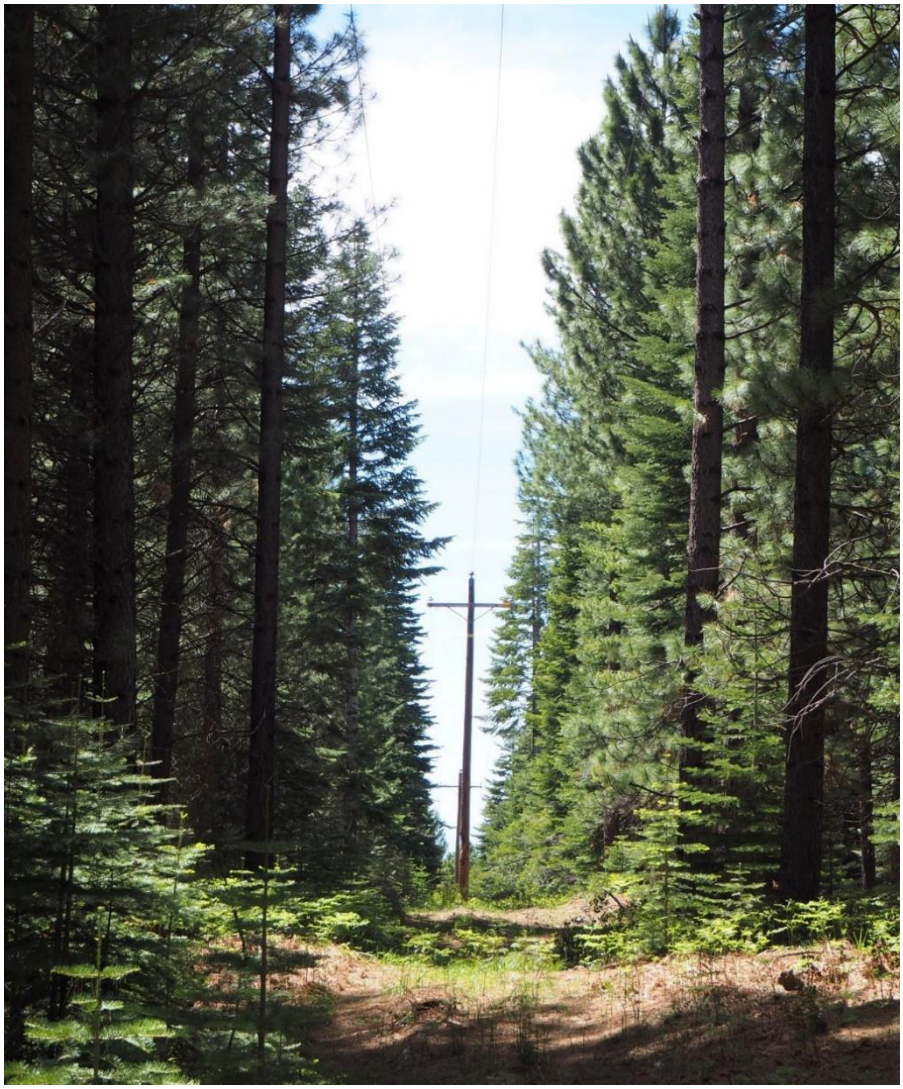
Scoping Notice

Hat Creek-Westwood Hazard Reduction Project

Lassen National Forest, Lassen and Shasta Counties, California



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Introduction

Proposal

The Lassen National Forest (Lassen) is proposing vegetation management actions on National Forest System (NFS) lands in the vicinity of Pacific Gas and Electric Company's (PG&E) 60kV electrical transmission line between Hat Creek and Westwood, California. The Hat Creek-Westwood Hazard Reduction Project has been designed to treat forest fuels and reduce fire hazard in and around the power line corridor in accordance with the Lassen's Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP). Proposed activities include commercial and non-commercial thinning, as well as chipping, mastication, or piling of activity slash and existing dead and down material.

Background

Under the terms of its operations and maintenance plan, PG&E currently manages approximately 235 acres of NFS land included in its Hat Creek to Westwood right-of-way (ROW). The ROW is 40 feet wide: 20 feet on each side of the center line. During the winter and spring of 2019, however, staff from the Lassen and PG&E met to discuss the condition of hazardous fuels adjacent to the ROW. Under PG&E's transmission reliability program, the utility is working to mitigate hazardous fuels that extend beyond the confines of the power line ROW. The need for these treatments is also recognized by the Lassen and the two organizations have begun cooperating to address the issue. The result is this proposal that includes an additional 2,100 acres outside of the ROW that may be thinned to reduce forest fuels and fire hazard.

Location of the Proposed Project Area

The Hat Creek-Westwood line extends for approximately 54 miles from its northern terminus at the Cassel substation to the town of Westwood (Figure 1). Of those 54 miles, approximately 44 of them are on the Lassen National Forest. This project addresses the segments of the line that affect the Hat Creek (16 miles) and Eagle Lake (24.9 miles) Ranger Districts. (The Almanor Ranger District (3.1 miles) will address hazard reduction as part of its Robber's Creek project.) The project area is located in portions of Township (T) 35 North (N), Range (R) 40 East (E); T35N, R50E; T34N, R50E; T34N, R60E; T33N, R60E; T33N, R70E; T32N, R70E; T32N, R80E; T31N, R80E; T30N, R90E; and T29N, R90E of the Mount Diablo Base Meridian in Lassen and Shasta Counties, California.

Vegetation

There are a variety of vegetation communities within the project area. Species composition and structure are influenced by elevation, landscape position, aspect and stand history. The majority of the project area is composed of east-side pine, mixed conifer, or lodgepole pine habitats. In general, the east side pine type is dominated by ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) and Jeffrey pine (*P. jeffreyi*). The mixed conifer stands consist of ponderosa pine, Jeffrey pine, sugar pine (*P. lambertiana*), white fir (*Abies concolor*), Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) and incense-cedar (*Calocedrus decurrens*). Lodgepole pine (*P. contorta*) tends to compete best in riparian areas and wet meadows where the water table is near the surface. In addition to the forest cover, the power line corridor also includes significant open areas where the vegetation is dominated by grasses and shrubs—sagebrush, bitterbrush, and manzanita—but may also include woodland species such as western juniper (*Juniperus occidentalis*).

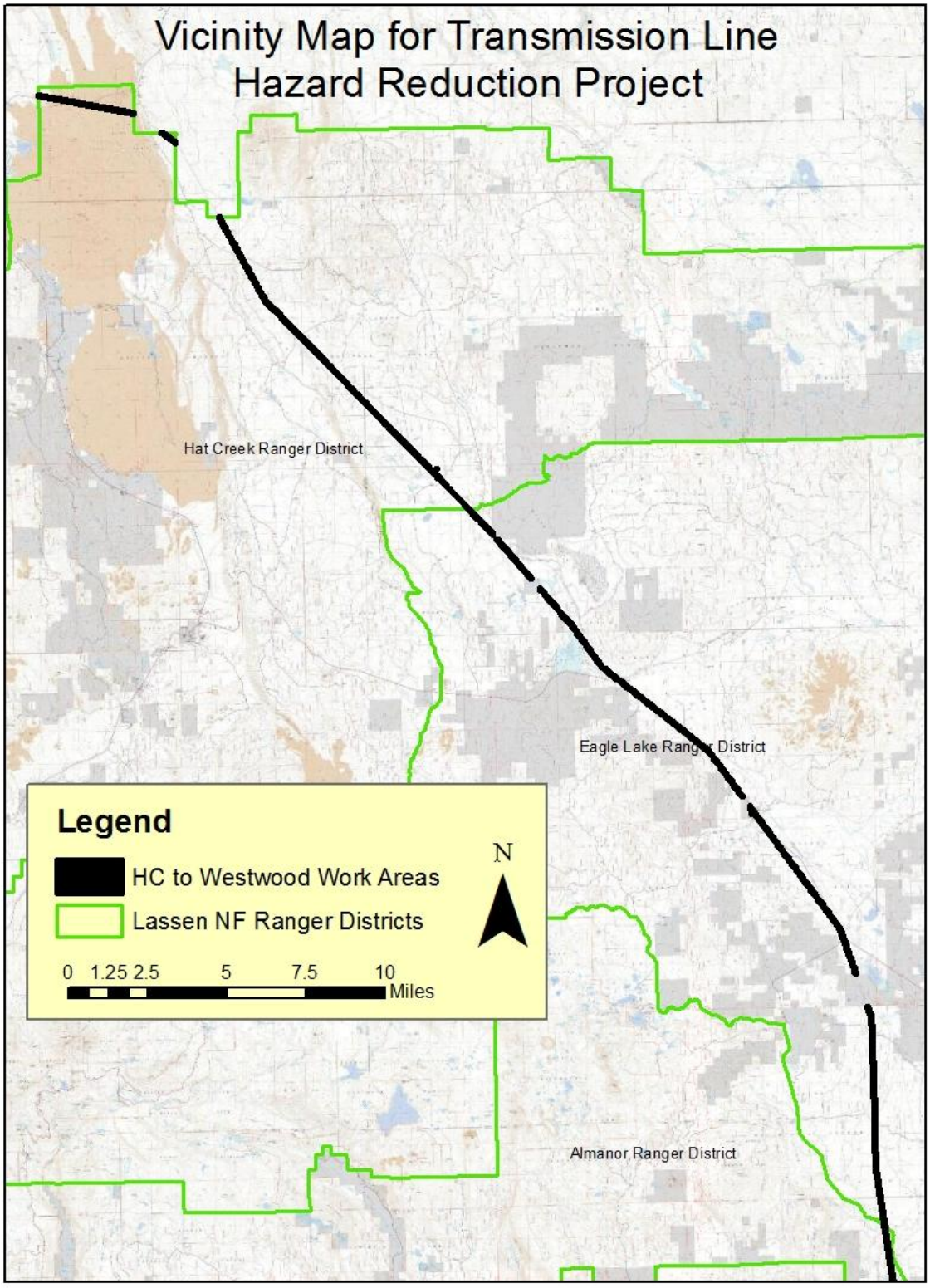

Figure 1. Vicinity Map.

Purpose and Need

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to implement the 1992 Lassen National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) and 1993 Record of Decision (ROD) and as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA) Final Environmental Impact Statement and ROD (2004) and the Management Indicator Species Amendment (2007) by proposing vegetation treatments designed specifically to meet the following direction:

- Management Intent: Reduce hazardous fuels in key areas to lessen the threat of high severity fire.
- Management Objectives: Design economically efficient treatments to reduce hazardous fuels.

Current Condition

Many of the stands adjacent to the Hat Creek-Westwood transmission line are dense with suppressed, small diameter trees (Figure 2). Species composition is currently trending away from fire tolerant species such as ponderosa pine and towards less desirable mixes of white fir and incense cedar. Small diameter white fir are the classic ladder fuel, with highly flammable branches and leaves extending from the duff to the forest canopy.

Figure 2. Current condition: Dense stands with developing ladder fuels.

Desired Condition

The desired condition is that falling tree hazards and hazardous fuels are treated adjacent to the Westwood to Hat Creek transmission line to reduce the chance of a major wildfire. Stands are fairly open and dominated primarily by larger, fire tolerant trees; surface and ladder fuel conditions are such that the likelihood of crown fire ignition is less than 20 percent, flame lengths are less than four feet, and over-story tree mortality is less than 20 percent under 90th percentile weather conditions.

Need for Action

The proposal is needed because project area forest stands are converting from relatively open conditions dominated by fire tolerant trees to overly dense stands with layers of ladder fuels. This current arrangement of ladder fuels increases the risk of crown fire ignition and is out of step with the LRMP desired condition. In the absence of any action to mitigate these conditions, the probability that these stands could support a crown fire will continue to increase.

Proposed Action

The proposed action would consist of two stand improvement treatments: Removal of hazardous vegetation within 40 feet of center line and a low thinning within 300 feet of center line. A stand improvement is an intermediate treatment made to improve the composition, structure, condition, health, and growth of even- or uneven-aged stands.[1]

Actions within 40 Feet of Center Line

Within the wire zone,[2] all incompatible vegetation will be marked for removal. Incompatible vegetation is that which is undesirable, unsafe, or interferes with the intended use of the site. This includes any vegetation that can grow to a height that encroaches into PG&E's minimum vegetation clearance distances, presents a fire hazard, impedes access or obscures the inspection of equipment. Within the border zone,[3] vegetation will be marked for removal that may pose a hazard to the lines within the next five years from grow-in or fall-in. Additional trees and other vegetation may also be marked for removal if it poses a potential threat to the safety or reliability of the line at any time in the future. Well-spaced, healthy vegetation can be left in the border zone if, based on the professional judgment of the inspector, the vegetation will not be a hazard to the lines in the foreseeable future. For border zone trees outside of the documented easement but within 40' of each side of centerline for 60/70kV lines, vegetation will be marked for removal that may pose a hazard to the lines within the next five years from grow-in or fall-in. Additional trees outside the corridor specifications listed above will also be marked for removal if they are an observable danger to the lines.

Specific Elements of the Proposed Hazard Vegetation Removal

- Cutting of incompatible vegetation near and adjacent to the powerlines using chainsaws and/or mechanical logging equipment (were such machines can be operated safely). In accessible areas, debris will be chipped. If a location is not accessible for a track chipper, debris will be piled and

[1] Silvicultural treatments are defined by the Dictionary of Forestry, published by the Society of American Foresters.
[2] Wire Zone - For 60/70kV the minimum wire zone distance is the section of the corridor located between the outside conductors plus 10 feet on each side.
[3] Border Zone- The border zone is the area from the outer edge of the wire zone to the edge of the documented easement, assuming that easement is sufficient for the safe, reliable operation of the line.

burned. In visually sensitive areas vegetative screening of compatible species shall be retained including adjacent to major roads, trails and areas of significant public use.

- Chipping older debris from previous trimming and removal work will help to reduce fuel loading along the powerline corridor. This is achieved using traditional chippers, rubber-tracked chippers and masticators which can access areas further from existing roads without significant ground disturbance.

- Clearing woody shrubs and small trees within and adjacent to power poles and towers. Chainsaws and chipping are the standard tools used in this application.

- Clearing woody shrubs and small trees within and adjacent to access roads and trails. Objective is to achieve 12 foot wide clearance on roads and 8 foot wide clearance on trails. Chainsaws and chipping are the standard tools used in this application.

Stand Thinning up to 300 Feet of Center Line

A thinning is an intermediate treatment made to reduce stand density in order to enhance forest health and species composition. There are several methods of thinning, but in this case, the project area stands will be thinned from below. Also called a "low" thinning, this method involves the removal of trees from the lower crown classes to favor those in the upper canopy. The project area will be thinned to achieve a target basal area of between 40 and 60 square feet per acre. In addition, this project will favor the retention of fire-resistant trees such as ponderosa and (rust-resistant) sugar pine, and will target the removal of shade-tolerant species such as white fir. "[T]hinning from below [] can most effectively alter fire behavior by reducing crown bulk density, increasing crown base height, and changing species composition to [] fire-adapted species," (Graham *et al.* 1999, 22).

Specific Elements of the Proposed Stand Thinning

- Stands will be thinned from below to a target basal area of 40 to 60 feet per acre.

- Ground-based logging equipment will be used to remove commercially viable material—sawlogs and biomass.

- In areas inaccessible to ground-based machines, hand thinning may occur.

- No hardwood trees, or conifer trees greater than 30 inches in diameter at breast height (DBH), will be cut unless they pose a hazard to the power line.

- Trees will be favored for retention in this order: Healthy Sugar Pine, Ponderosa/Jeffrey Pine, Douglas Fir, Incense-Cedar, White Fir, Lodgepole Pine.

- Cut stumps 14 inches in diameter and greater of live conifer trees will be treated with an EPA-approved and California registered borate compound (Sporax® or Cellu-Treat®) to prevent the spread of Heterobasidion root disease.

Treatment of Surface Fuels

Thinning treatments, on their own, may be ineffective at reducing fire hazard in stands with high fuel loads. As a result, surface, ladder, and activity fuels will be treated across the entire project area using a combination of methods, including lop and scatter, pile and burn, mastication, and chipping. Lop and scatter involves the cutting and spreading of debris so that it lays within 18 to 24 inches of the ground; piling of fuels may be done by hand or by machine, with burning of the piled material occurring during

the winter when the risk of fire spread is low; mastication is the process of mulching vegetation with machinery by grinding, shredding, or chopping small trees, shrubs, or slash into small chunks; and chipping is the use of a machine to convert unused material into wood chips—these chips can provide fuel for local biomass energy facilities. Due to the need to reduce forest fuels within the project area, removal by chipping (and hauling for biomass) is the preferred fuel treatment method, but the others may be used where chip-van access is limited.

Project Design Criteria

Preliminary project design criteria are listed in Table 1; items may be added as the analysis continues. These criteria were developed to avoid or eliminate adverse impacts from project activities, and are incorporated as an integrated part of all action alternatives. Project design criteria are based upon standard practices and operating procedures that have been employed and proven effective in similar circumstances and conditions: Forest Service Manual and Handbook direction, Regional Watershed Conservation Practices, LRMP standards and guidelines, and other management requirements that apply to the proposed activities.

Table 1. Project Design Features.

Resource Area	Project Design Features
Cultural 1	All historic properties eligible or potentially eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (i.e., Class I and Class II properties) within treatment areas would be protected by employing Standard Resource Protection Measures (SRPM) as defined in the Regional Programmatic Agreement and Interim Protocol. Cultural site boundaries would be flagged as non-entry zones for project activities (flag and avoid).
Cultural 2	If cultural resources are encountered during project activities, all work would immediately stop in the vicinity of the find until an assessment of the situation is made.
Cultural 3	Project treatments may occur within specific cultural sites with the approval and direction of a Cultural Resource specialist.
Soil 1	Soil quality standards and appropriate Best Management Practices (BMP) that protect forest soils would be implemented for the entire project. BMPs are described in Water Quality Management for Forest System Lands in California, Best Management Practices (2011), LNF LRMP (1993), and the 2004 SNFPA ROD.
Soil 2	Mechanical equipment would not operate on slopes greater than 35 percent.
TES Plants 1	New occurrences of TES plant species and special interest species discovered before or during ground-disturbing activities would be protected through flag and avoid methods (with the exception of Astragalus inversus, for which no special protections would be required).
Wildlife 1	Northern goshawk limited operating period: Maintain a limited operating period (LOP), prohibiting vegetation and fuels treatments within approximately ¼ mile of a goshawk nest site during the breeding season (February 15 through September 15) unless surveys confirm that northern goshawks are not nesting. If the nest stand within a protected activity center (PAC) is unknown, either apply the LOP to a ¼- mile area surrounding the PAC, or survey to determine the nest stand location.
Wildlife 2	Northern goshawk limited operating period: Maintain a limited operating period (LOP), prohibiting vegetation treatments within un-surveyed suitable nesting habitat (February 15 through September 15) unless surveys are conducted to confirm that northern goshawks are not nesting.

Environmental Analysis and Decision-Making Process

Decision Framework

The Responsible Official for this analysis and decision is the Forest Supervisor, Lassen National Forest. The Responsible Official will decide whether to proceed with this action as described above, to proceed with an alternative action, or to do nothing at this time.

Categorical Exclusion from NEPA Analysis

The Supervisor of the Lassen National Forest has made a preliminary assessment that this proposal falls within categories of actions listed in the Forest Service National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Handbook that are excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and that no extraordinary circumstances exist that would preclude the use of these categories. Specifically, this proposal is within exclusion six, described at 36 CFR 220.6(e)(6): "Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction. Examples include but are not limited to: i) Girdling trees to create snags; ii) **Thinning or brush control** to improve growth or **to reduce fire hazard** including the opening of an existing road to a dense timber stand; iii) Prescribed burning to control understory hardwoods in stands of southern pine; and iv) Prescribed burning to **reduce natural fuel build-up** and improve plant vigor." (Emphasis added.)

Public Involvement

By soliciting public comments the Forest Service ensures that a wide range of interests and perspectives are considered in the development and refinement of the proposal, and that any site specific natural resource concerns are identified. From a procedural perspective, soliciting public comment provides a means to meet the NEPA requirements for public scoping, and provides the interested public with an opportunity to comment prior to a decision by the responsible official.

Scoping

Scoping is the process of obtaining public comments about proposed Federal actions to determine the range of issues to be addressed. This document and the accompanying cover letter initiate the public scoping process for the Hat Creek-Westwood Project. This analysis will be posted on the Lassen National Forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA), and the announcement will be mailed to government entities, elected officials, special interest groups, and individuals known to be interested in this project.

Comments received will be analyzed and categorized as 1) outside the scope of the proposed action; 2) already decided by law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher-level decision; 3) irrelevant to the decision to be made; or 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence; or 5) identifying a site specific natural resource concern to be addressed and tracked through the analysis. (The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) NEPA regulations require this delineation in Sec. 1501.7, "…identify and eliminate from detailed study the issues which are not significant or which have been covered by prior environmental review (Sec. 1506.3) . . . .")

Formal Notice of Opportunity to Comment

On January 17, 2014, the President signed into law the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 (Pub. L. No. 113-76). Section 431 of that Act directs that the 1992 and 2012 legislation establishing the 36 CFR 215 (post-decisional appeals) and 36 CFR 218 (pre-decisional objections) processes "shall not apply to

any project or activity implementing a land and resource management plan . . . that is categorically excluded . . . under the [NEPA]." On February 7, 2014, the President signed into law the Agricultural Act of 2014 (Farm Bill) (Pub. L. No. 113-79). Section 8006 of the 2014 Farm Bill repealed the Appeals Reform Act (ARA) (Pub. L. No. 113-76). The ARA's implementing regulation was 36 CFR 215. The 2014 Farm Bill also directs that the pre-decisional objection process established in the Consolidated Appropriation Act of 2012 shall not be applicable to categorically excluded projects or activities.

As a result of these two statutes, the USDA Forest Service will no longer offer notice, comment, and appeal opportunities pursuant to 36 CFR 215 or 36 CFR 218 for categorically excluded projects. These legislative changes do not limit the public's ability to comment on Forest Service projects and activities. The Forest Service will continue to offer public involvement opportunities for categorically excluded projects as provided for in its NEPA procedures at 36 CFR 220. The Forest Service will also continue to provide notice, comment, and pre-decisional objections as provided for in 36 CFR 218 for proposed projects and activities that are documented with an EA or EIS.

References Cited

Graham, Russell T.; Harvey, Alan E.; Jain, Theresa B.; Tonn, Jonalea R. 1999. The effects of thinning and similar stand treatments on fire behavior in Western forests. Gen. Tech. Rep. PNW-GTR-463. Portland, OR: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station. 27 p.

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